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ABSTRACT

A qualitative enquiry explored, with a range of family therapists and systemic practitioners, the influence they perceive to have been made on their personal and professional liver by the literary texts they have read. Noting that "literary" is broadly interpreted to include poetry, prose, drama/film, song lyrics, etc., the study's aims were: to explore the ways in which family therapists think literary reading has influenced their personal and professional development; to examine the uses which family therapists make of literary resources in their work; to explore literary reading's actual and potential ability to contribute to the personal and interpersonal processes involved in transformations of meaning; and to begin to test out ways of using ideas generated to enrich the experiential repertoire of therapists in training. The study so far has progressed from the Delphi study which served to open up the topic and generate ideas, to interviews (data collection) which develop the themes revealed/generated/developed by the Delphi, to the forthcoming analysis/results/discussion, and finally, to feedback to the participants. According to the paper, simple analysis so far suggests that some themes are likely to be important and recurring. (Contains 4 figures of data.) (NKA)

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Reading Minds: Using Literary Resources in Family Therapy.

by Liz Burns

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Reading Minds: using literary resources in family therapy

Liz Burns

In this paper I hope to tell you something about both the process and the content of a study in progress. It is a qualitative enquiry exploring, with a range of family therapists and systemic practitioners, the influence they perceive to have been made on their personal and professional lives by the literary texts they have read.

Figure 1

Aims of the study

- ***To explore the ways in which family therapists think literary reading has influenced their personal and professional development;***
- ***To explore the uses which family therapists make of literary resources in their work (as therapists, teachers, supervisors, etc.)***
- ***To explore literary reading's actual and potential ability to contribute to the personal and interpersonal processes involved in transformations of meaning (such as in therapy, in personal growth and development and in professional training – these come together in the experience of the participants in this Study)***
- ***To begin to test out ways of using ideas generated to enrich the experiential repertoire of therapists e.g. in training***

(in this context 'literary' is broadly interpreted to include poetry, prose, drama/film, song lyrics etc)

The underlying conceptual framework is social constructionist, by which I mean that I consider that realities are constructed socially between people, primarily by means of language. I do, however, assume a degree of stability in social realities, in interaction with a context of constantly evolving meaning and significance.

My own interest centres upon the part of this pattern which is essential to the reading of literary texts and how this is brought by the therapist, who is also a reader, into the process of therapy. I hypothesise that a therapist should have a better chance of helping clients to lead lives which are more to their liking, if he or she has not only a wide range of experience, both direct and indirect, to facilitate empathy, but also a well developed imagination and capacity to conceive of alternatives to the status quo.

As a practising family therapist I bring to the work systemic ideas and skills, which are equally applicable reading and to research. By systemic thinking and skills I mean the habit of addressing questions or problems in their social context and acknowledging

the importance of connectedness, relationship and interactive processes in human affairs.

It was just after qualifying as a family therapist in 1991 that I began to be intrigued by a symmetry I perceived between reading and therapy. I first noticed this relationship within myself as I became conscious of my tendency to make imaginative links between life dilemmas, and those I recognised from stories in novels and in the more abstract forms of poetic expression. I also noticed similarities between the kinds of analytic thinking which I tended to use as a therapist and those which I had previously learned to use in understanding and appreciating a literary text. Finally I saw a connection between the feeling of intense fascination and liberation of energy which I had come to associate with therapeutic work, particularly with family groups, and the imaginative excitement which, for me, had always accompanied critical engagement with a literary text.

Although this is not a theoretical presentation I'll refer quickly to the evidence I first noticed suggesting cross-fertilisation reflected in a range of theoretical literature in the areas of therapy and literary study. Sometimes the approach to ideas through language is largely shared between disciplines - for example, current interest in deconstruction. Over a longer historical perspective I noticed theoretical streams converging from time to time. For example I discerned a clear systemic inspiration in some aspects of literary criticism during the 70s, influencing the work of Wolfgang Iser, who used it to direct attention away from the content of text towards the relationship between text and reader and the effect which reading had on the psychological processes of the reader.

Theory, and by this I mean the theoretical bases underlying both systemic family therapy and literary study, is important in this study in two ways: as a context and aid to gathering and interpreting the data; as a common background shared to varying degrees by myself and the participants. As the study has unfolded I have also been conscious of a strong reciprocity between the subject matter or content of the enquiry and the methodology adopted. In broadly systemic terms, I see this as occurring within a continuous circularity, involving interaction and feedback between the elements of the project.

The Study

It is often said that researchers should be passionately in love with their subject if they and their work are to survive, and, as an independent enquirer, I have good reason to know the truth of this. Literature was my first love and it was my intention to frame the study in the most interesting of terms for myself. The questions are intimately meaningful to me and to the satisfaction I derive from my life and work.

The process of the study so far:

Figure 2

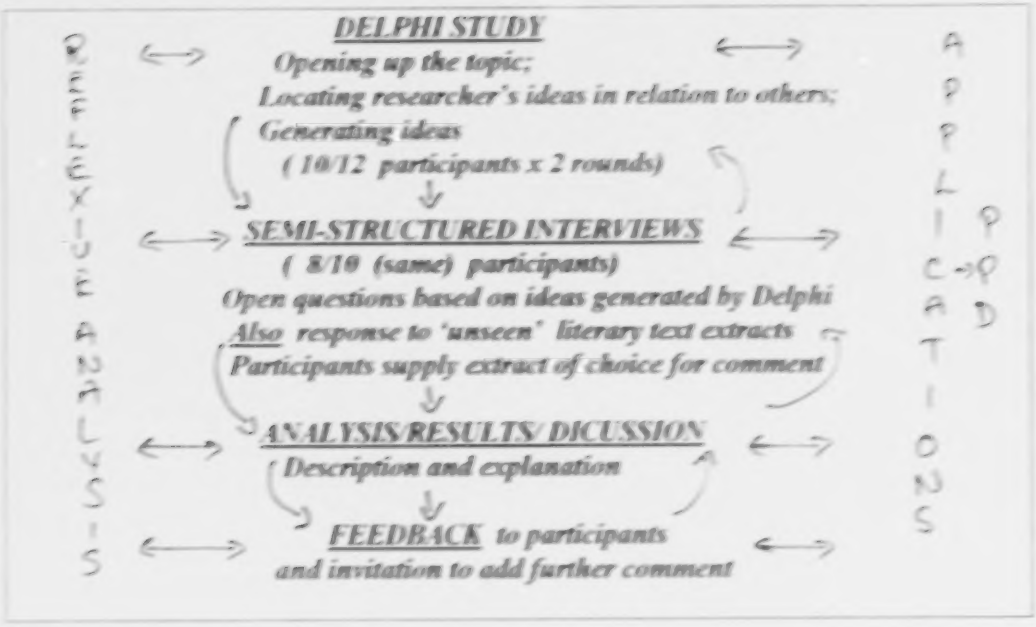
DELPHI STUDY
Opening up the topic;
Locating researcher's ideas in relation to others;
Generating ideas
(10/12 participants x 2 rounds)
SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS
(8/10 (same) participants)
Open questions based on ideas generated by Delphi
Also response to 'unseen' literary text extracts
Participants supply extract of choice for comment
ANALYSIS/RESULTS/ DICUSSION
Description and explanation
FEEDBACK to participants
and invitation to add further comment
REFLEXIVE ANALYSIS
APPLICATIONS

Figure 2 shows the study's embryonic narrative structure, in that it has a beginning, middle and end. It begins with the Delphi study which served to open up the topic, generate ideas and give me some kind of bearing on the place of my own ideas in relation to others. It has a middle, data collection and analysis, which is where I am at present. This consists of interviews which develop the themes revealed/generated/ developed by the Delphi. The process of analysis drives the story along towards an end which I can guess at, even hope for, but is, as yet, out of sight. In typical circular fashion, I expect the end to be merely a punctuation which will enable one sort of perspective – and enable me to present a thesis for examination – but also to be a point in a continuing process.

As the study has unfolded I have also become conscious of a strong reciprocity between the subject matter, or content of the enquiry, and the methodology adopted. In broadly systemic terms, I see this as occurring within a continuous circularity, involving interaction and feedback between the elements of the project.

Data Collection : Delphi study

Figure 3

DELPHI STUDY: *Iterative process*

ROUND ONE:	***Postal Questionnaire*** *– 12 potential participants:* ***Knowledgeable people – senior practitioners, teachers and Writers on Family Therapy***
	Open questions *based on reading history and predictions about the relevance of literary resources in family therapy teaching and practice* *10/12 responses, 8/12 consent to be interviewed in due course*
ROUND TWO:	***Postal Questionnaire*** *– 10 participants* ***128 statements generated in Round One used to create second questionnaire. Participants asked to rate statements on a Likert scale, according to agreement.***
ANALYSIS:	*Simple count of responses*
USE:	***Inform and contextualise semi- structured interviews. Inform applications e.g. Personal/Professional Development Programme (PPD) for trainees in Qualifying Family Therapy Training***

Two rounds of the Delphi Study proved very useful in:

- delineating the topic;
- generating material on which to build further questioning
- locating my own ideas in a wider context of informed opinion

It rapidly became clear to me, however, that I was predominantly interested in the meanings which respondents attached to their own experience and use of literature, and that the subtleties of their thinking would need to be drawn out in greater depth by interviews

Data Collection : Interviews

Figure 4

Semi –Structured interviews : 1- 1.5 hours at venue of participant's choice

8 participants (same as Delphi respondents)

Open questions:

1. Initial request to talk about reading history in relation to:

a. World View

b. Understanding of relationships

c. Sense of self

2. Further questions re. Experience of being taught about literature; Use of literary resources in work (therapist, teacher, writer etc); perception of own ideas in relation to those of others

3. Unseen extracts: participants asked to give reactions to 4 short literary extracts and to say if, and how they might use them in their work.

4. Piece of text of participant's choice: participants asked to bring to the interview a piece of text and to talk about its personal and professional significance

Figure 4 indicates the content of the semi-structured interviews.

The participants are, without exception, individuals with strong, interesting views on their own lives and their work. They are all very experienced and from a variety of backgrounds - medicine, social work, clinical psychology, academia - 3 men and five women. One participant is of mixed race, three had significant experiences of geographical migration in childhood and two had to make adjustments of language in coming to England. Several different routes to Family Therapist status are represented and all are currently engaged in practice and teaching. At least half the participants are actively engaged in research.

The joy and privilege of participating as interviewer is to hear the unfolding responses of participants to questions, which are simultaneously specific and personal but also capable of revealing wider and more general significance.

Individuality

Naturally, some very individual, unique, memories and associations with reading have been given. For example, one person said, in response to an extract from Joseph Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness':
"I like landscape so much, so I always feel connected to things which are about landscape but also say other things... It was always like that. If ever I was upset when I was young, I would go and lie flat, face on the ground... on the grass, go right down and talk to the earth"

Another person talked about different ways of reading, and the different types of gratification to be gained - "I also liked detective novels - to be gobbled up like bags of sweets" "I suppose I like detective fiction because it presents an orderly world, with a reliable moral order... and if it doesn't always come out right in the end, at least I can count on how I'm going to feel at the end"

Yet another person likes nothing better than to be told the same story over and over again - a surprise ending spoils the whole thing.

Participants make their own connections with reading and with particular texts. One person connects her thoughts about the meaning of literature with the philosophy of Theodor Adorno and the ensuing debate about the "impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz". Another person relates the content of a poem to Attachment Theory and goes on to talk about the meaning which her liking for Attachment Theory has had in her professional life.

Commonality

At a preliminary stage of analysis some themes are emerging strongly. For example, several respondents have been very interested in the kind of "different world" which reading or thinking about literature creates. This is mostly seen as enabling different perspectives to be taken in an intellectual way but also relates to the different type of feeling and consciousness which is involved in the world of imagination. Participants have described this in diverse ways such as - liberating, as enabling them to grasp a quality of experience which is otherwise just out of reach and as a means of expressing or experiencing passion.

There has been considerable interest in the relationship of lived lives and written lives whether clearly fictional or something like literary biography. This strand probably comes nearest to familiar ideas about narrative and the storied quality of individual and shared lives. Some participants have been particularly inspired by accounts of the lives of writers which highlight how experience is processed in ways which are particularly "writerly" e.g. Georges Sand - literary biography.

An important conversation

Perhaps the theme which is most interesting to me at the moment is emerging in the form of a conversation or debate between the views of participants who make a lot of use of talking and thinking about reading in their work, and those who find literature very important in their own lives but are very reluctant to use it in talking with clients. This seems to exemplify a series of questions which are of key importance in this study: " What is the social function of literature?" "does literature provide a common resource or does it represent the interests of an elite?" "can clients be empowered by the inclusion of 'literary' voices in therapeutic conversations, or does this practice always involve an imposition of therapist values?" "is intellectual gameplaying encouraged or otherwise by an interest in literature, and its inclusion in therapy?" Clearly these questions are relevant in many contexts but they have also been called forth with great energy in this study.

A recurring experience for participants in these interviews has been that, once they have begun to talk in depth about their engagement with texts, the generation of ideas and understandings has gained momentum and they have been conscious of a process set in train which will not terminate with the interview. In other words there are ideas started which will only be articulated after the interview is finished.
This may be a common experience in interviews, but I was interested when one of the participants in this study told me about the process as it developed for her - she found it difficult to start as she came straight from another task - an academic paper she was writing about a specific topic in which she is considered an expert - she felt she needed space and time to enter into this very different reflective, imaginative place. It seemed to be quite a difficult journey to undertake on that autumn afternoon, when her fax machine was playing up and I interrupted her important professional work.
However, as she talked and travelled further into the world of literature and reading, she found that ideas came thick and fast - including some very useful insights into the work she had left to come to the interview. She said - 'it's not that I think I'm not doing it right now, I just think there will be many more ideas, memories etc when we're finished talking'. They were hovering on the brink of being said but had not yet come to that point.
In order to respond to this observation by participants I plan to feed back to them a thematic version of our conversation so that further thoughts can be added.

<u>More fun for Family Therapists?</u>

This may be good point to mention what I think may be one of the benefits of this study. I should emphasise that this is something I am picking up ad hoc at this point where my analysis is still quite rudimentary. The participant I have just mentioned experienced the change from one type of activity - writing an academic paper - to talking about reading as a major effort, despite the fact that she knew I was coming and what was entailed. She felt she should have made more preparation etc. Another busy practitioner and academic told me she would only be able to talk about formal

Psychology reading because that was really her main interest. Both participants actually finished up talking freely about the type of imaginative, literary reading which had been extremely important to them both in forming their world view, their understanding and conduct of relationships and their sense of themselves both as professionals and as people. I am very wary of making any kind of suggestion about the usefulness of this study in emphasising the importance of easing access for professionals to different, more playful, more creative aspects of themselves but it does seem to me that if the journey could be shorter, more familiar, more accustomed - just easier, we might well experience greater freedom and real ceativity in professional as well as personal contexts. This is one of the areas I will be looking at most closely with the PPD (Personal/ Professional Development) group which is particularly focused upon facilitating trainees in the acquisition of professional identity and appropriate methods of coping with the demands of therapy.

Analysis

This is a point of active evolution in my plan for analysing the data gathered. The primary strategy is based on Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis – IPA (Smith 1995) which explores the participant's view of the world, the 'insider's perspective' but also recognises that the researcher's own conceptions are required in order to make sense of the "other" personal world through a process of interpretation. This approach is basic to the analysis of the interview transcripts as a whole.
I shall then be going on to look in more detail at differences and similarities in the interview data, how they relate to the original questions of significance in the development of family therapists etc.

Simple analysis so far suggests that some themes are likely to be important and recurring (both in Delphi where they are stated crudely and in interviews where they are elaborated). Some are mentioned above and other examples are:

- identifying with a situation or a person in a piece of literature helps the reader to feel confirmed in identity and encouraged to have confidence in making choices or acting differently;
- seeing or feeling a dilemma to be worked out in some way (could be simple narrativisation which makes sense by contextualising the dilemma, or could be the process of working unruly issues and/or emotions into an acceptable/ aesthetic form) expands the sense (horizon) of possibility in "stuck" personal and professional situations.

Clinical Examples

As for direct use of reading and writing in clinical work, emergent themes suggest that when therapists do discuss clients' reading or writing, recommend possible readings or listen to accounts from clients about books or poems of their choice, the therapists perceive advantages, including an increase of energy and ability to see or feel alternative solutions to problems. One participant recalled a very stuck marital situation where he was finding extreme difficulty in getting the couple to listen to each other. In desperation he asked them what they were reading currently. At the next

session he was amazed to discover that they had discovered a new, enabling focus for conversation, which helped them to move out of previous sterile, stereotyped arguments and into a freer more imaginative dialogue around their reading choices and how they helped them to define themselves. Another participant recalled her work with young women who were self harming in alarming ways in a residential secure unit, where the writing (and I'd want to suggest the reading) of poetry assumed huge importance, particularly when the girls were at their most disturbed. These examples indicate the complexity of the processes observed – the quality of conversation which is implied and the multidimensional processes set in train:
(– girls' interior conversations → conversations with each other and staff → conversations in therapy→ conversations which link with societal discourses)

Extracts

One section of the interview, in which participants are asked to comment on extracts which are essentially unseen - may lend itself to an additional type of analysis - maybe one particularly focused on the form of language used and the dialogical nature of reading and thinking about literature.

Reflexive analysis

This is an essential part of the analysis above - to show my own involvement in the process. Since my involvement is present in all areas and is represented in many different ways, multiple methods of accounting for it will have to be sought. These methods will evolve as the study progresses, but I have already experimented with some formal reflection on where I am coming from and my own perception of the research project. This and possible subsequent reflections are based around texts and use similar ideas to those which are evolving in the application (PPD) groups. For example, I found it useful to use Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shallott" not because of any particular merits of the poem, although I do find it fascinating if infuriating, but because it had been influential as part of my development (I used it in the very first workshop situation) and because it helped to draw out and give form to some of the personal and professional turning points of my life.

Applications

Participants in this study are involved in several different types of activities, all of which inform the others. As a practitioner and teacher myself, I would find it hard to take seriously any research which did not have a clear eye on benefits for practice and/or teaching and learning.

The main way in which I have experimented informally with applying ideas from the research has been in literary workshops for practitioners, mostly at Conferences, and in Personal and Professional development groups for trainees.

This academic year I have begun a programme on a qualifying Family Therapy course in the North of England. The members of the group are all professionally qualified in another discipline – clinical psychologists, nurse specialists, social workers in child mental health. Transformation of meanings through conversation is at the heart of the PPD group process, and in this way the group's process mirrors that of therapy. The Masters level course (Qualifying level in UK) on which they have just embarked is very demanding of the whole person (this is what makes it different from previous training), and very confusing and disorientating for participants at this stage.
There are 7 members, all of whom have previous professional qualifications. I have agreed with them a specific mandate to facilitate their (sadly) infrequent Personal Development discussions, with the help of literary extracts they bring to the group. I'll try to give you a flavour of it. The plan is that they will each choose a piece from a novel, a poem or similar - someone brought song lyrics and another person brought some cartoons - this extract is selected to represent something about where the individual feels him/herself to be in relation to the course. There is never enough time to go round, so the session is initially divided into equal shares and someone invited to start. The first session took place at a very pressured time, when participants were feeling de-skilled and overwhelmed. This was the first piece to be selected:

'Uncertainty of a poet' by Wendy Cope:

I am a poet.
I am very fond of bananas.

I am bananas.
I am very fond of a poet.

I am a poet of bananas.
I am very fond.

A fond poet of: 'I am, I am' -
Very bananas.

Fond of 'Am I bananas.
Am I?' – a very poet.

Bananas of a poet!
Am I fond? Am I very?

Poet bananas! I am.
I am fond of a 'very'.

I am of very fond bananas.
Am I a poet?

Substitute the word 'therapist' for 'poet'.

Some discussion ensues about everything being up in the air, muddled and confused and yet quite exciting - some people are very anxious, some feel the confusion is quite luxurious - not something they allow themselves in their day jobs. The next person has brought a piece from 'Charlotte Gray' by Sebastian Foulkes about the contradictory feelings and actions of falling in love. Each contribution follows from the last, picking up on something to relate to - like a sequential discussion in FT training. I have to do very little facilitation - the texts seem to provide a very secure structure, perhaps because they are available to all and in the possession of nobody, within which group members can very quickly feel able to express a range of thoughts and emotions. The texts they have chosen seem to bring other voices into the room, not bossy or demanding voices but ones which can speak eloquently from another time and place about the quality of experience. My impression is that this is like a reversal of the kind of group in which you sit in silence waiting for something to float to the surface - here we have a focus, carefully crafted, chosen by one, yet available to all - a kind of surface under and around which the group members can make associations and connections. When the time is up - although the feelings expressed have been at times angry, panicky, disappointed, confused - the group ends somehow with a positive feel - which seems to me to have more to do with the process that we have all been through than any problem solving we have been able to do. None of the externals have changed (although this is built in to the group's mandate - the possibility of giving feedback from the group to the 'management') but there is a feeling that something significant has been achieved. It has been like a performance - and a good one too.

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